

Daal & dolls: A recent newcomer to Toronto and his wife have turned their Yorkville apartment into a happening

salon..... 2

Toronto

Daal & dolls: A recent newcomer to Toronto and his wife have turned their Yorkville apartment into a happening salon

Shinan Govani

National Post

1,066 words

9 February 2002

National Post

Toronto

TO5

English

(c) National Post 2002. All Rights Reserved.

At **Azmi Haq's** last dinner party, the coat rack collapsed. This is less a commentary on the quality of the rack than on the number of coats on the rack and, indeed, the number of bodies with coats who will do whatever possible to get an invite to the wildly popular Indian buffet feasts put on by Haq and his wife, Mahreen.

Newcomers to Toronto, their parties have become, in a relatively short period of time, almost famous. If they were a movie, you might even say that they have strong "word-of-mouth" -- a big, beautiful, more-the-merrier vibe combined with a funny cross- section of interesting guests and food that many consider to be the best Indian fare in the city. Think Literary Salon meets Mardi Gras meets Empire Club meets Gerrard Street.

On the night of the most recent dinner, held, as per usual, in the couple's spacey Yorkville apartment, Haq opens the door of his home, a glass of something in his hand, and says with a squirrelly grin, "We've been waiting for you."

Inside, the place is abuzz with about 60 people. The food has yet to be laid out, but there is too much laughter, glad-handing and easy flirtation underway to hear the growl of any stomachs.

Dessert empress Dufflet Rosenberg, of Dufflet Pasteries, who looks about the height of Dr. Ruth, stands in one corner surrounded by a number of adoring sweet teeths.

In the kitchen, I spot Toronto MPP George Smitherman and TV host/pollster Allan Gregg huddling conspiratorially in the corner.

Literary honcho Sam Hiaye is there, too, buttonholed by a number of people who work at Alliance-Atlantis. CBC journalist (and alpha-male) Jamie Kastner is embroiled in a conversation about Oscar Wilde with a precocious 12-year-old girl.

Writer Lydia Eugene, who has travelled from Montreal for the party, is talking in a soft, Marilyn Monroe whisper about her new Cuban lover. A discussion about the movie Moonstruck wafts out of the crowd. So does a debate about the merits of Krispy Kreme donuts v. Tim Horton donuts.

"Azmi's parties are a decadent, sensual bath for the senses," Rebecca Rosenblat begins to tell me when I ask her why she's here. A self-described "sexpert" who goes by the nom-de-plume Dr. Date, she adds, "I've been to a few of these now, and these evenings always scream of a cerebral sexiness that makes you wanna light up a cigarette once you're done. And I don't even smoke!"

"As for Azmi himself, he has so many talents, above and beyond the menu. He speaks more languages than moi -- and I speak five -- and he's the only other person I know other than myself who's hooked on Ghalib, Rumi, and Octavio Paz ... "

"Azmi's parties are obligatory," Smitherman says, point-blank, to me. "You meet people who are cool and idealistic."

Kastner -- whom I catch up with later in the evening when he's moved on from Oscar Wilde to chicken coriander -- shows his flair for puns when I question him about the appeal of these dinners.

"It's a combination of daal and dolls," he says.

"But, no, seriously," he then continues piously, "Azmi is great because he does that rare thing in Toronto: bringing cool people together and staying in touch."

It's amazing, really, how often the word "cool" comes up when discussing Toronto's newest social impresario. Haq was raised in Pakistan, where he is something of a personality. Even now, here in Toronto, a Pakistani cab-driver will often do a double-take if Haq gets into his car. Not only did he appear in several TV series but he also had a short stint as an aide to embattled prime minister Benazir Bhutto. (Asked about her, he will only say, "She remains an enigmatic character. She disappointed us on so many fronts, yet she was so brave and courageous on others.")

Here in his newly adopted city, Haq is busy with several script projects, including one called *East of Yonge* that director Srinivas Krishna, best known for his 1991 indie hit *Masala*, has agreed to helm.

That's, of course, what Haq does when he's not throwing super-size soirees. A consummate party-thrower back in his homeland, Haq and his perennially smiling wife clearly relish the fact they've imported South Asian hospitality to Toronto.

"It's a way to establish a small-town feel in a big city," he explains.

Furthermore, he says, all the great people he's met have prevented him from sliding into the "new immigrant's dip."

And so, like a modern-day Hogtown answer to Jay Gatsby, his collection of friends, both high-profile and not, keeps expanding. He's what writer Malcolm Gladwell described as a "connector" in his book *The Tipping Point*: someone who plots his parties like a master billiards player, bringing together collisions of different people. If anybody was in the business of six-degrees-of-separation gap reduction, this would be the guy.

Case in point: Stephen Shinn, who can't believe the number of Zoroastrians who are at the party.

"I'm a Zoroastrian and I almost never run into others in the city," exclaims the producer who brought *The Vagina Monologues* to Toronto.

Similarly, a chiropractor friend I've brought to the party almost immediately runs into some old medical pals.

And it's like two pollsters passing in the night when Liberal Party insider Bob Richardson arrives late into the night and misses, by a whisker, Allan Gregg, the man who used to be Brian Mulroney's pollster.

Of course, some people could care less about the guest list. Like, for instance, that young, shaggy-haired cutie who doesn't seem to stray too far from the buffet dinner all night. I hear she got very well acquainted with the spicy tofu platter.

Black & White Photo: Peter J. Thompson, National Post / Party guests mingle around the buffet table at **Azmi Haq's** most recent gathering. Some consider the food the best Indian fare in town, the guest lists include writers, politicians, pollsters and "sexperts."

Document finp000020020209dy290003q